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THE CHARACTER AND COMPOSITION OF ACTS.

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TO THE historian of Christianity the book now entitled *The Acts of (the) Apostles* is of unique interest. It is the one approximation to history proper, as distinct from biography, not only in the New Testament itself, but, strangely enough, in early Christian literature. Indeed, it is only with the beginning of the fourth century that we get a second to place alongside it, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, bishop of Cæsarea. Even this latter seems largely inspired by its predecessor in its leading idea, the orderly tracing of the growth and extension of the Christian church as the predestined religion of the Roman world. Acts is therefore more deserving of our attentive study than at first sight appears. Think of it: It is Acts and nothing else that gives coherence and unity to the picture of the apostolic age as it rises to the eye of any of us. Apart from it, even the epistles of Paul, priceless as they are, not only religiously, but also as materials for history, have little more than a potential value for the historian. How are they related to each other in time and in the history of their author? For the answer to such a question our one resource is Acts; he who takes from Acts its good name leaves us, as students of the apostolic age, poor indeed.

And yet about Acts there has been more controversy than about almost any book in the New Testament; even today the most varied opinions are held by scholars touching its authorship, date, and historical worth. Of course, we must not judge the book according to our wishes, but on its own merits as ascertained through candid study, by like standards of criticism to those recognized in the study of other historical documents. Yet it is well to sober ourselves by the reflection of

how much our power of framing a constructive account of the apostolic age, which shall be valid for all and not largely subjective, depends upon our findings in relation to Acts.

I have called it the first and fundamental history of the church. But is it a history at all in the strict sense? That is, was it so in its author's mind and intention? By history in the strict sense we mean a narrative of facts set forth so objectively that the writer has no ulterior object in view, but only knowledge of fact as fact. But history in this sense is, probably, purely modern, an outcome of the scientific spirit, the spirit of detachment from human interests in a practical sense. Of "scientific history," in this sense, there is no specimen in ancient literature, not even in Thucydides, who, in all likelihood, makes the nearest approach to it. Certainly the last place in which we have a right to look for it is among the early Christians, whose spirit and outlook were intensely practical, since they were absorbed with the interests of the soul and its salvation. Indeed, there is one valuable law of early Christian literature to be kept ever in view and constantly applied: that every Christian writing had its origin in the desire and duty of edification, of practically promoting the well-being of the Christian society, individually or collectively. To this Acts is, and can be, no exception. But edification need not mean sacrifice of truth, in the sense of conscious paltering with facts. It may and must give them a certain color by placing them in certain relations and perspectives meant to bring out their latent meaning for man and his destiny; and this element of interpretation may be faulty, while yet the historian is quite veracious and reverent of facts as God's truth.

Further, this element of interpretation is not something alien to history, though it cannot but be inadequate to the fulness of meaning in the facts as they occurred. The chronicle is not the type and climax of history; it is raw material. All history, however scientific, really involves an interpretative element; only it must not be allowed to warp the facts or lead to the suppression of other facts, or aspects of facts, known to the writer, but which he feels would invalidate his interpretation were they

disclosed (*suppressio veri*). The facts should be so stated that the materials are furnished for forming a fresh judgment, even of a different complexion from the writer's own. One simply claims for a historical interpretation involved in the arrangement of facts that it is true as far as it goes; and the historian's rank is measured by the distance which his interpretation will go, compared with other possible interpretations latent in those concrete deposits of the human soul which we call facts of history. For we make a serious mistake in talking of these as "hard" and "simple," when they are really compact human thoughts, emotions, and ideals.

Up to a certain point, then, all agree that Acts is not the naïve narrative which we are apt at first to suppose, but a highly artistic or interpretative work. *Ars est celare artem*. And Acts proceeds from a historical imagination of the first order, one in which the facts have been "lived through" afresh with rare sympathy. May we add, with real intelligence and insight? Here scholars divide. Some hold that the author's thought, and especially the wish that is often father to the thought, has proved a distorting medium, through which the original facts can hardly be discerned. Others, on the contrary, believe that the interpretation is essentially true, or, at least, was the truest then possible.¹ Personally I agree with the latter class, believing that many have simply criticised Acts through figments of their own imagination, which they have fathered upon its author as his "standpoint" or interpretation. With all due reserve, therefore, the following is put forward as an interpretation of his interpretation—for that is really how we have to put the matter, if we do not wish to deceive ourselves or others.

Premising that the final test of any theory of the scope of Acts is its continuity with that underlying the gospel to which its opening verses point back, we may describe its emphasis and movement of thought somewhat thus:

The church is the continuation of the life of its founder.

¹ We must remember that the experience of the ages since then, especially the subsequent history of the same society, the Christian church, must give us some advantages over our author in relation to completeness of vision—once we really master what he also shows us.

As his life was divine in its origin and actuating power, so is its issue in the society called into being of God, through him, and by the energy of the Holy Spirit. It is the prime object of the narrative to make this evident by the simple logic of facts. For consider the divine initiative and superintendence manifest, first, in the birth of the church as a society enjoying a new and superhuman consciousness of joyous sonship and brotherhood, associated with superhuman powers; and, then, in the story of its expansion, in spite of all resistance from human prejudice and self-interest of every kind, into virtual world-wide supremacy. It sprang from the soil of ancient and indeed primæval revelation, the religion of Israel, of which, in the truest sense, it was the consummate flower. But from the first it was sharply distinguished from the narrow particularism with which current Judaism, as known to the Roman empire, was synonymous. Of this distinction in spirit Judaism, by its own hostile attitude to constant advances, afforded speaking testimony, while the Jewish Scriptures were the very witness to which the true issue of Israel's religion appealed against its spurious national outcome. If Jerusalem, the hearth of messianic faith, was the church's birth-place, its destiny was indicated by its spread within less than a generation throughout the empire; so that its leading missionary fulfilled the desire of his heart in preaching the one imperial religion for mankind in Rome, the heart of the world, and that "unmolested." Yet not in the way of earthly triumph, but through human weakness and suffering (as with his Master), upheld and led on in triumph by divine power, the sovereign grace of God.

Here three ideas stand out in strong relief: (1) divine initiative and blessing; (2) universality of scope, which is gradually wrought out by God through the slow-moving thoughts of even his faithful servants, until one signal "vessel of election" is led, with full recognition of his Lord's purpose, to bear his name abroad in unexampled fashion and with heroic devotion, and is left in bonds, but with the Word of God free and triumphing in imperial Rome itself; (3) the baffled hostility of Judaism, shown by very contrast of wilful aloofness to be but the moribund

sheath from which the living blossom had emerged, free, glad-some and gladdening, and obviously divine.

To these grand outlines the Pauline epistles present no contradiction, only underlying harmony; yet a harmony lying so deep as to present no trace of literary dependence on the part of Acts, which rather in some matters of detail creates problems for the formal harmonist. Whence this identity in difference? Only through the fact that the two men had mingled their thoughts as friends, the author of Acts as disciple of the apostle of the gentiles. The Lucan authorship is the only natural and unforced explanation of the broad features of the situation, in keeping with the uniform witness of antiquity, where there was nothing but truth to start the belief. Nor will any theory of partial Lucan origin satisfy the facts of unity in standpoint as here set forth (as marked in chaps. 1-12, as in chaps. 13-28, and as integral to the one as to the other), any more than it can deal honestly and honorably with the virtual claim to eyewitness by the author of the whole, involved in the use of "we" in certain sections.

This phenomenon has often been treated in too formal and mechanical a fashion, as if it meant that the author were present only where he revealed his presence in this way. It is high time to handle the matter in a more vital and psychological manner, and to recognize that there were other and subtler causes behind this breaking forth of the narrator's personality at certain points of his narrative, in spite of his inherent modesty and preoccupation with the great central figure in whose company he remained so steadfastly. I have elsewhere² gone into these matters at sufficient length, and will here only express a conviction that Luke was in Paul's company in the early days in Antioch (the Bezan text of Acts 11:27, "when *we* were assembled together," though a mere gloss, contains an early and true tradition to this effect); nay, more, that he had perhaps come with Paul from Tarsus, as a convert won by his early witness to the Jews and the proselytes of both degrees who

² *Commentary on Acts*, in the "Century Bible" (Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack), 1901.

congregated in the synagogue of his native city.³ Be this as it may, there is as good reason, judging by the vivid quality of the narrative, to assume Luke's presence as an eyewitness of the first missionary journey as of any later one (*cf.* 13: 13, "Paul and his company," for more than Mark as accompanying Paul and Barnabas, and 13: 42-52 for a picture second to none in first-hand "impressionism"). Nor is there any sufficient ground to assume that Paul's beloved medical attendant and friend left his side thereafter for more than short intervals until the close of Acts, which was probably also the close of the great apostle's earthly life. There is no need to assume the contrary even of the visit to Jerusalem in Acts, chap. 15, while there is much that seems rather to demand Luke's presence as an eyewitness, unless one adheres doggedly to the identification of this visit with that described in Gal. 2: 1-10⁴ as one for private conference.

Acts is full of indirect evidence touching the character of the man whose selective affinities explain its special features and emphasis. These have indeed a significance relative to the needs and dangers of the church amid which its author lived and moved; and as such they deserve careful pondering by the historian of the later apostolic age. But here we shall treat them primarily as revelations of the writer's own spirit and ideals, utilizing some of the felicitous language of the scholar referred to in our last note but one. Luke was an artist by nature, as well as a physician by training. The result is a wonderful faculty for close observation and vivid depiction. "His Greek nature is seen in the versatility which makes him at home in such varied scenes and situations," and in such different psychological atmospheres as those of the intensely Jewish primitive community, the rude Lycaonians and anon the simple natives of Melita, the cultured Athenians, the variegated life of

³ See Acts 9: 30; 11: 25; Gal. 1: 21, 23. This view is put with great force by R. B. RACKHAM in his recent *Commentary on Acts* in the Oxford series.

⁴ The present writer sees no reason to identify this visit to secure a personal understanding with the "pillar" apostles with that recorded either in Acts 11: 30; 12: 25, or in chap. 15. He would rather place it during the year alluded to in Acts 11: 26.

Ephesus, the procurator's court at Cæsarea, and the company on board an Alexandrian grain ship. As for his more personal qualities, we see in him the spirit of the genuine Christian disciple. Love was the basis of his character, the love of a gentle and affectionate nature. He was "the beloved physician."

The first attribute of such affection is self-forgetfulness, and this is shown in Luke's modesty or entire self-effacement. Though he could say of this history "*cujus pars magna fui*," yet there is not a word about his own work, his services to Paul, not even a hint of Paul's affection for him. . . . The gentleness comes out in his interest in women. The position of women varied then as now. At Jerusalem of course they were kept very much in the background. In Macedonia, and still more in Asia Minor, women moved about in society, even in public life, very much as they do now. . . . But everywhere alike Luke is mindful of the part played by women.⁵ . . . And we have a number of names and characters of all classes.

Luke's "disciple" spirit showed itself in his relations with his fellow-disciples. He had in Paul an earthly master who evoked his whole-hearted enthusiasm; witness the enthusiasm which Luke's account of him has stirred in countless readers in all ages; also the last testimony of the apostle himself—"only Luke is with me."

Similarly the characteristic of church life which attracted him and which he delights to portray is "brotherly love." . . . He notes the joy and strength which comes from the common fellowship and from the assembling together of the brethren.⁶ . . . The brotherly spirit of the church found its chief outward manifestation in hospitality⁷—as in the refreshment of Paul and his friends at Sidon, the hospitality at Puteoli, and the courtesy of the Roman Christians in coming forty miles to meet him.

The ideal of the Christian life is to renounce, in spirit at least, all separate interests, even in things material; to feel nothing "one's very own," but all things as "common" in the household of faith, with a corresponding simplicity of desire and life. On the other hand, covetousness and the love of display lie at the

⁵ See 1:14; 8:3, 12; 9:2; 12:12-15; 13:50; 16:1-3, 13 ff.; 17:4, 12, 34; 21:5, 9; 22:4.

⁶ 1:14; 2:1; 4:23; 6:2; 9:26-30; 11:26; 12:5, 12; cf. 15:3 f.; 20:37 f.; 21:5 f., 12, 14; 27:3; 28:14 f.

⁷ See 11:26, translating "were hospitably entertained in the church" (cf. Matt. 25:35 for the word used).

very root of practical infidelity, as virtual negations of the unity among brethren and of the Holy Spirit, which is the true good of the kingdom, its sacred trust. Hence we have the story of Ananias and his wife, the hint that even in the earliest days the divisive class spirit of self-love was at work (6:1), and the case of Simon Magus—all probably given, partly at least, as lessons for Luke's own contemporaries.

Again, Luke had the eye to see that all things "work together for good to them that love God." "Hence throughout Acts we breathe an atmosphere of thankful and even joyful optimism. All ended well." This can be illustrated from many parts of Acts, but notably by the way in which Luke treats Paul's imprisonment, which is described at such strange length (as it seems to us, until we get his point of view). Here Luke's last word is a cheerful picture of the apostle in his divine "self-sufficiency" (*αὐτάρκεια*, Phil. 4:11), exercising his ministry even under the limitations of confinement to his lodgings in military custody. Some, like Mr. Rackham, have inferred that Luke's serene tone is due to ignorance of the martyr-death awaiting Paul. But this is to misunderstand Luke's attitude altogether. As regards Paul's death in itself, it was to him a worthy end for his hero, a victory like that of their common Master whose own earthly work ended in like fashion, as he had recorded in his gospel—in both cases bringing out clearly the fact that the death was voluntarily accepted long before it arrived. Then, as regards his failure to record it, that was due to the fact that he, and all conversant with Nero's character as "a human portent," viewed Paul's execution by the Roman sword as a hideous exception to the regular attitude of the empire thus far. To include it in Acts would be unfair to the principles and spirit of Roman rule, and therefore shocking to the feelings of "Theophilus," if not misleading to less well-informed readers. Nor was it needful. What was notorious to all, though a source of shame to many, could constitute no case of culpable silence. But the fact that Luke can have thought the tragedy so much of an exception as to pass it over, notorious as it was, without attempting any explanation, surely proves that he wrote Acts at

a date early even in Vespasian's reign; since we gather that the Roman state began under that emperor legally to repress Christianity, though not with a rigor equal to that of the reigns of Domitian or Trajan.

Perhaps we can go one step farther, and infer the exact situation when Luke wrote to have been one in which the cases where Roman tribunals had recently visited Christians with penalties were traceable to Jewish hostility or to the self-interest of individuals, such as Demetrius and his fellows. If we suppose that such persons had in some instances stirred up the mob against their strange Christian neighbors, then we have all the types of persecution to which Acts supplies analogies. And it is most natural to suppose that one main occasion of Acts was to show how in the past the Roman courts had not suffered themselves to be set in motion in such ways against a religion which, in the person of its typical representative, they had repeatedly treated as within the law. To such a situation Acts is altogether relevant, but hardly to any other stage in the development of Roman policy in regard to the Christians. For it was only as long as there could be any misunderstanding on the part of intelligent Christians touching the meaning of the new Roman practice under a normal ruler (in contrast to a Nero), that a Christian like our author could have thought it worth while writing a narrative introducing such an explanatory and apologetic precedent. Once the attitude of the state became unambiguous, apart altogether from the malice of those who usually appeared as accusers or informers, then such a plea became a mere anachronism, useless even for the comfort of Christian readers. Further, it is usually on the first appearance of a new policy that protest in one way or another is wont to find utterance.

We conclude, then, that Acts reflects relations, as regards both Judaism and the empire, most suitable to a year or two after 70 A. D. At that date Judaism was smarting with an intense bitterness, ready to relieve itself on the sect which had shown its "apostasy" from its mother by aloofness during her recent agony; while this same event had proved to the empire,

far more clearly than even the circumstances of the Neronian persecution of 64 A. D., that the Christians were no true subdivision of Judaism, which, despised or hated as it was, yet enjoyed protection as a *religio licita*. Hence, with a conscientious ruler like Vespasian, the law against persons suspected of being dangerous to public safety and good order would soon be put into effect,⁸ under the local stimulus of those—Jews or others—who had private ends to serve. It is persecution of this sort—not for the name as such, but rather for the crimes of which a strange and ill-understood sect was easily suspected (especially after the bad name for anti-social spirit, *odium generis humani*, acquired or enhanced through Nero's action; cf. 1 Peter), the *flagitia nomini cohaerentia* of Tacitus—that is implied in Acts as the treatment to which alone Christians were thought liable. There is no hint that the controversy as to worship of the deities of the Roman state, including the *genius* of the emperor, had as yet arisen (as it probably did under Vespasian)⁹ to embitter their lot, and to make the empire appear the ungodly thing it is to the seer of the Apocalypse.¹⁰

Consequently I would date Acts about 72 A. D., earlier or later according as Luke's gospel fell within or later than the *annus mirabilis*, 70 A. D., which impressed on its author the need of defining beyond mistake the real relation of Christianity to Judaism, now so fearfully discredited by events. That Paul suffered at the end of the "two years" of Acts 28 : 30 I see no reason to doubt, not even in the epistle of Clement when rightly interpreted.

It has been impossible, in this brief study of a many-sided subject, to do more than indicate a point of view, without

⁸So RAMSAY, *Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 256 ff., though he dates this development "some years" after 70 A. D.—without giving any sufficient reason for such delay.

⁹This is the best explanation of the mutilated passage in Suetonius, excellently explained by Ramsay (*op. cit.*, p. 257), which records that Vespasian "even wept and groaned" over certain penalties he felt forced to carry out.

¹⁰The present writer doubts whether even this writing reflects a date later than the early years of Domitian, if as late (see his *Apostolic Age*, pp. 404 f., 408, note). For the tendency to deify the emperor took effect in the province of Asia long before it was countenanced in Rome.

attempting to anticipate all objections. I would simply ask my readers to peruse Acts with this as a working hypothesis in mind, to see whether it does not fit into and explain the presence of most at least of the phenomena. If this shall result in the discovery of some insuperable difficulty to the theory, the present writer will be sincerely grateful to have it pointed out to him, publicly or by private communication ; for it will be certain to help him one stage nearer to the true solution, which is the common interest of all students of this priceless record of the earliest age of the faith that is our life.